

# Wellness: The healthy lawyer is not an oxymoron | Darryl Singer

Monday, April 10, 2017



Darryl Singer

A lawyer friend of mine was asked by a supplier a curious question: “How do you cope with helping people with problems all day long and then go home at night to deal with your own?” My friend shrugged. “People pay me a lot of money per hour to fix their problems. My state of mind or my emotional health doesn’t enter the picture.”

Slough it off. Suck it up.

While the first part is true, the second part is frequently overlooked in the legal profession. Everyone copes with stress differently; some compartmentalize better than others. A sizable percentage don’t cope well at all.

I know this to be true. From 2003 to 2009, I battled anxiety, depression and addiction to OxyContin. For most of that time, I was in denial until I hit rock bottom and I finally sought help. I recently wrote about my six-year descent into hell in *The Globe and Mail*.

The great irony of my story is that I had the perceived plum job as general counsel at a financial company at the time. My problem was simple: it was not me. It was not who I was. For me, the wrong fit plus my personal issues led to disaster, faster.

After my article was published by *The Globe and Mail*, I received about 200 e-mails from lawyers all across Canada (and some judges, too) thanking me for sharing my story. You don’t have to read too far between the lines to know that I was not the only lawyer battling mental health and addiction issues.

So, I got to thinking. I’m one of the lucky few who escaped the clutches of addiction. And there are thousands of lawyers across Canada who could probably use a helping hand.

And here we are. *The Lawyer’s Daily* accepted my offer to become their “Wellness Columnist” in the legal profession because it’s an important issue. This is my first column.

So, why should you care about these issues if you are not struggling? Because the lawyer who might be your partner, associate, friend, opposing counsel, or classmate might be. And no matter how smug you are about it today, it could happen to you. But at a minimum, the issue affects us all. Clients suffer, the administration of justice suffers, and the reputation of the profession suffers.

Wellness as a topic in the legal profession is still a relatively new concept; we lawyers are not “early adopters.” We have come a long way since the days of not talking about mental health and addiction at all. While the average person didn’t talk about their demons, that went doubly for lawyers.

My goal is to use this column to shine a light on a number of wellness-related issues, in the hope of helping lawyers achieve a more balanced life in the practice of law.

Many lawyers suffer from mental health issues, including rates of depression as high as 33 per cent, two to three times higher than the general population (law students suffer depression rates of 40 per cent). In fact, the American Bar Association has put up the website [www.LawyersWithDepression.com](http://www.LawyersWithDepression.com).

As a result, many lawyers suffer from alcoholism and substance abuse issues at [twice the rates of the general population](#), especially cocaine and prescription drugs. Substance abuse increases with years of practice. Not surprisingly, a reported 25 per cent of the lawyers facing disciplinary issues suffer from drugs, alcohol or depression.

My experience representing lawyers at discipline hearings suggests the number of lawyers with substance or mental health issues is actually significantly higher, perhaps even a majority.

Lawyers have one of the highest suicide rates among the professions, with [lawyers suffering at a rate of 3.6](#) times higher than non-lawyers. And lawyers suffer with high divorce rates, too. This profession causes more divorce than almost any other, and those who remain married have challenges that other professionals may not face, owing to the punishing hours and unremitting demands of our clients.

Law students carry a huge financial burden to the tune of about \$26,000 year for tuition fees alone at Osgoode Hall. They graduate from law school with a debt of more than \$100,000. That's a lot of stress.

While I give credit to the Law Society of Upper Canada for their recent progress, we still need to do more.

So, where do we go from here? What can the law society, law schools and the big firms do to stop burnout? What can we lawyers do for ourselves? What measures are already in place for those who need help and aren't afraid to seek it? And what can be done to make it okay for those still in hiding to seek help?

I don't have all the answers. But having spent hundreds of hours over the last six years helping others with similar issues, I believe I have unique insight and answers to many of these questions.

In future columns, I want to talk about what happiness means to different lawyers, explore different areas of wellness; how different lawyers are overcoming obstacles and achieving a level of contentedness; provide tips and techniques on achieving a healthy career and personal life; and look at new developments in the area of wellness in both the legal profession and beyond.

If you have a story idea, want to share your story, or you need help, shoot me an [e-mail](#). A healthy lawyer is not an oxymoron.

*Darryl Singer is principal of [SINGER Barristers Professional Corporation](#), a civil litigation firm in Markham. He is actively involved in numerous pro bono and volunteer organizations helping lawyers with wellness issues.*